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UZBEKISTAN: Jehovah's Witnesses face trial and expulsion

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Ten days after his home in the village of Yubileiny was raided by police, who confiscated religious literature, Jehovah's Witness Shukhrat Ashurov and his colleague Alisher Argeliyev appeared on 28 May at Gazalkent town court. "According to my sources, at the next hearing Ashurov and Argeliyev will be charged with preaching to children," their lawyer Rustam Satdanov told Forum 18 News Service. "The leaflets were brought to Uzbekistan legally," Ashurov insisted to Forum 18. "As far as I know, there is no ban on the Bible, New Testament and Koran in Uzbekistan." Villagers have demanded that the two abandon the Jehovah's Witness faith and return to Islam, otherwise they will be expelled.

Two Jehovah's Witnesses are facing prosecution under the code of administrative offences after police raided the home of one of them and confiscated religious literature. Shukhrat Ashurov and Alisher Argeliyev from the village of Yubileiny in Gazalkent district, 90 kilometres (55 miles) north-east of the capital Tashkent, appeared at an initial hearing on 28 May at Gazalkent town court. But judge Rovshan Khaidarov decided that additional witnesses should be summoned to court and adjourned the case until 3 June. "According to my sources, at the next legal hearing Ashurov and Argeliyev will be charged with preaching to children," the two men's lawyer Rustam Satdanov told Forum 18 News Service in Tashkent on 28 May.

Three officers of the Gazalkent police, together with two witnesses, came with a search warrant to Ashurov's home in Yubileiny on 18 May, Ashurov told Forum 18 in the village on 25 May. The officers told him that villagers had collectively complained that he and fellow resident Argeliyev were "spreading propaganda about Christianity and Wahhabism" (a term widely but largely inaccurately used in Central Asia to denote Islamic fundamentalism).

The police searched Ashurov's home and confiscated around 40 Jehovah's Witness leaflets, as well as two Korans, two New Testaments and one Bible. The officers warned that a case against the two would soon be brought to court.

Ashurov insists he and his colleague have done nothing wrong. "The leaflets were brought to Uzbekistan legally and I took delivery of them at the Jehovah's Witness centre in Chirchik, which is registered with the authorities," Ashurov told Forum 18. "As far as I know, there is no ban on the Bible, New Testament and Koran in Uzbekistan."

On 20 May the villagers held a meeting at Yubileiny's school at which those present demanded that Ashurov and Argeliyev stop preaching the Jehovah's Witness faith and "return to the faith of their forefathers", a reference to Islam. Several villagers also threatened the two, saying that if they failed to do as they had been asked they would be thrown out of the village (under Uzbek law, villagers may turn individuals out of the village if their behaviour appears unacceptable to local residents).

"I only found out recently that Ashurov and Argeliyev had become followers of Yoga," the head of the village administration, Riskali Nadyrov, told Forum 18 on 25 May in Yubileiny, apparently confusing the Jehovah's Witnesses with adherents of Yoga. "No one intends to turn them out of the village but of course they, like all of us, ought to be Muslims."

An official of the department for combating terrorism at the Internal Affairs administration for Gazalkent district, Khusan Imanaliyev, reported that his office had received information that Wahhabis were operating in Yubileiny. "The area around the Charvak reservoir, which includes the village of Yubileiny, is a distinctive area: fighters for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan operated here in 1999," he told Forum 18 in Gazalkent on 26 May. "Naturally, we had to provide an efficient response to that information."

In Imanaliyev's view, "of course Ashurov and Argeliyev are not terrorists, but they have broken Uzbek law by engaging in proselytism". He therefore believed the administrative case against them was justified. He said the books were confiscated from Ashurov as "material evidence", but insisted that those not banned in Uzbekistan will be returned to their owner.

"The authorities simply weren't expecting this case to receive publicity," Satdanov maintained, adding that Forum 18's visit to the area as well as his own visit had put extra pressure on them. "This means they must prepare more carefully for the legal case."

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